DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 914 CG 012 844

AUTHOR Witkin, Stanley L.
TITLE Communication Training for Couples: A Comparative Study.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy (11th, Atlanta, Georgia, December 9-11, 1977); Best Copy Available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Comparative Analysis; Interpersonal Competence; *Interpersonal Relationship; Marriage Counseling; *Problem Solving; *Program Effectiveness; Research Projects; Sensitivity Training; *Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Skills Program; *Couples Communication Program

ABSTRACT

Two communication training programs--the Communication Skills Workshop (CSW) and the Couples Communication Program (CCP)--and a wait-list control group were compared on measures of communication effectiveness, problem solving and relationship satisfaction. Subjects were 54 volunteer couples randomly assigned to conditions. Highly distressed couples or those seeking marital therapy were excluded from the study. All training was done in groups utilizing male and female co-trainers. One relationship satisfaction questionnaire was administered prior to training; all questionnaires and performance measures were given one and seven weeks following training. Results indicated that the CCP training produced significant increases in nonverbal positive messages relative to the CSW and no training. CCP training also resulted in significant decreases in nonverbal negative messages compared to the CSW. Both training conditions significantly reduced verbal negative messages. Self-report measures revealed no significant differences at follow-up testing. Although trainer differences may have partially accounted for the results, the CCP appears to be a viable alternative to behavioral programs such as CSW. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED160914

COMMUNICATION TRAINING FOR COUPLES:
A Comparative Study

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Stanley L. Witkin
NEW YORK STATE COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY
A Statutory College of the State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S L Witkin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Paper presented at the
11th Annual Convention of the
Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy,
Atlanta, December, 1977

(This paper is a brief report of the completed research. A more detailed and comprehensive manuscript is in preparation and will be furnished, when available, upon request.)

Stanley L. Witkin
Department of Community Service Education
N-135 MVR Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 148.3

CG012844

Two communication training programs- the Communication Skills Workshop (CSW) and the Couples Communication Program (CCP) -and a wait-list control group were compared on measures of communication effectiveness, problem solving and relationship satisfaction. Subjects were fifty-four volunteer couples randomly assigned to conditions. Highly distressed couples or those seeking marital therapy were excluded from the study. All training was done in groups utilizing male and female co-trainers. One relationship satisfaction questionnaire was administered prior to training; all questionnaires and performance measures were given one and seven weeks following training. Results indicated that the CCP training produced significant increases in nonverbal positive messages relative to the CSW and no training. CCP training also resulted in significant decreases in nonverbal negative messages compared to the CSW. Both training conditions significantly reduced verbal negative messages. Self-report measures revealed no significant differences at follow-up testing. Although trainer differences may have partially accounted for the results, the CCP appears to be a viable alternative to behavioral programs such as CSW.

The present study was designed to evaluate two communication training programs -- the (CSW) Communication Skills Workshop (Witkin & Rose, 1977) and the (CCP) Couples Communication Program (Nunnally, Miller & Wackman, 1975) -- on the communication effectiveness and relationship satisfaction of couples. In addition, each training program was compared to a wait-list control.

Programs

Both training programs are educationally-oriented (c.f. Liberman, Wheeler & Sanders, 1976) and utilize a group training format.

Communication Skills Workshop The CSW is a "behaviorally-oriented" program deriving its conceptual base from social learning frameworks (Patterson & Hops, 1972; Birchler, Weiss & Vincent, 1975; Staats, 1972) and communication theorists (e.g. Pace & Boren, 1973, Mehrabian & Reed, 1968) and drawing upon the intervention strategies of the Oregon group (e.g. Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973; Patterson, Hops & Weiss, 1975; and Richard Stuart (1969, 1974). Emphasis in the CSW is upon learning specific communication skills, e.g. specificity, feedback, and nonaversive requests, and applying these skills to relationship problem solving. The duration of the CSW is six, two-hour sessions with at-home assignments, including readings, given between sessions.

Couples Communication Program Based upon concepts from the field of family development, symbolic interactionism, and modern communication and systems theory, the CCP attempts to provide couples with skills to increase their awareness and meta-communication (Nunnally, Miller, & Wackman, 1975). Four weekly three-hour sessions are devoted to teaching couples how to: (1) increase and verbally express their self-awareness; (2) accurately exchange information; (3) utilize different communication styles; and

(4) maintain and build self-esteem, especially when dealing with conflicts (Miller, Nunnally & Wackman, 1976). Similar to the CSW, between session exercises are given for practice at home as well as readings from a text authored by the program developers (Miller, Nunnally & Wackman, 1975).

METHOD

Subjects

Couples who participated in the study were recruited from newspapers and radio advertisements, letters sent to randomly selected married couples, agency referrals and a feature story about marital communication in a local newspaper. Demographic characteristics of the participating couples are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Design

All subjects participated in a pretraining assessment session consisting of general information about the training and completion of the Locke Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (MAQ). Couples could be eliminated from the study for two reasons: (1) they were seeking marital therapy rather than an educational training program; (2) their mean MAQ score was below 80. The first sixty couples to meet this criteria were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the CSW, the CCP, or a control group.[1] The control group subjects completed all evaluation measures and received training following completion of the study. All subjects were evaluated approximately one week (post-test) and seven weeks (follow-up) following completion of their training program.

Measures

All evaluation measures were completed independently by subjects at post

and follow-up assessment sessions. The MAQ was also completed prior to training.

Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (MAQ). The MAQ represents a "traditional" measure of marital satisfaction and thus allows for cross-study comparisons. In the present study, the MAQ was slightly modified to include cohabitating couples not legally married, e.g. "marriage" was changed to "relationship."

Areas-of-Change Questionnaire (A-C). The A-C has been used by the Oregon group (e.g. Weiss, et al., 1973) as a global marital satisfaction measure. Scores on the A-C are based on ratings of desired frequency of spouse performance to thirty-four specific activities as well as the predicted frequency of spouse's ratings for the subject. Norms for fifty distressed and fifty non-distressed couples have recently been reported by Birchler & Webb (1975). Mean conflict scores were 28.0 for the distressed couples and 6.9 for the non-distressed group.

Marital Communication Inventory (MCI). The MCI is a forty-six item inventory designed to measure various communication processes such as a couple's ability to express themselves and their style of expression (Bienvenu, 1970). As a measure of post intervention change, the MCI has shown increases in studies of the CCP (Larsen, 1974) and the CSW (Witkin & Rose, 1978). Modifications to account for non-married, cohabitating couples were also made on the MCI.

Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS). The MICS is a performance measure of couple interaction. Twenty-nine behaviorally specific codes are sequentially recorded from videotape by two trained coders (see Weiss & Margolin, 1975 for a more detailed description). For this study, the codes were collapsed into five *a priori* determined summary categories: positive

verbal (e.g. complement), positive nonverbal (e.g. laugh), negative verbal (e.g. criticism), negative nonverbal (e.g. ignore), and problem solving (e.g. positive solution). A subject's score on the individual MICS codes was expressed as a proportion of the frequency of all codes for that person for the particular discussion.

MICS codes were applied to two ten minute videotaped discussions by each couple at posttest and follow-up. The first discussion was on a "neutral" topic (e.g. "physical activities") and helped to acclimate couples to the discussion room and videotape equipment. Discussion two was based on the attempted resolution of an actual relationship conflict (determined earlier by response to a "conflict checklist") and was of primary interest to the evaluation.[2]

All discussions were coded by two experienced coders from the Oregon Research Institute. Coders were blind to the research hypotheses and and conditions. Interrater agreement was maintained at or above the minimal level of 70% recommended by the Oregon group ($\bar{X}$ = 80.11; SD = 4.91).

Discussion Evaluation. As a check on the validity of the MICS data, couples independently completed a brief (five-question) questionnaire immediately following each discussion. The first four questions asked for evaluation of of the discussion e.g. satisfaction. Question five requested subjects to rate the discussion in relation to the setting i.e. compared to the same discussion at home. Responses to this question presumably indicated subjects' perceptions of the representativeness of their interaction.

Procedure

Subjects in both programs were trained in groups of three to five couples. A male and female co-leader led each group. In the CCP condition all leaders were certified CCP instructors.[3] Group leaders in the CSW were Masters degree social workers or social work graduate students at the

University of Wisconsin. Two of the group leaders had received approximately fifteen hours of training from the author plus related readings. The other leaders were trained by the above two "senior" instructors. Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics and experience of the group leaders in each condition.

Table 2 here

As is evident from inspection of Table 2, CCP leaders were older, had more years of education, and significantly more experience than CSW group leaders. In addition, all the CCP co-leaders had previously led groups together, whereas only one pair of CCP leaders had prior experience in common.

RESULTS

Self-Report Measures

Results for the three self-report measures at the posttest and follow-up assessments are summarized in Table 3.[4]

Table 3 here

Posttest scores (Table 3) revealed only one significant difference between conditions. Analysis-of-covariance followed by post hoc comparisons (Scheffé) revealed a significant difference between the CSW and Control conditions on the Marital Communication Inventory; all other analyses were non-significant.

Follow-up differences on all self-report measures were non-significant.

MICS

Multivariate analyses-of-variance (with pretraining MAQ scores as a

covariate) were performed on the five MICS summary categories. Posttest MANOVA was not significant ($p < .07$) however, three univariate ANOVAs contributing to the overall multivariate F were significant. These results, summarized in Table 4, revealed significant differences for the summary categories of nonverbal positive, verbal negative and nonverbal negative messages.

Table 4 here

Follow-up MICS scores (Table 5) revealed an overall multivariate F of 3.23 ($df = 10,92$; $p < .001$).

Table 5 here

Univariate F-ratios contributing to the overall F had a similar pattern of posttest results except that the nonverbal negative category was no longer significant ($p < .06$).

A more detailed account of the above differences can be obtained from an examination of the pairwise differences between conditions as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 here

This analysis showed significant performance differences between the CCP and control group couples on nonverbal positive, verbal negative, and nonverbal negative categories at posttest, and maintenance of these differences for the first two categories at follow-up. CSW couples differed significantly from control couples on the verbal negative category at follow up assessment.

Differences between the two training conditions revealed that CCP couples exchanged significantly greater positive nonverbal messages than CSW

couples at posttest and maintained this difference at follow-up. In addition, nonverbal negative messages were also significantly less frequent for CCP couples relative to CSW couples.

Discussion Evaluation

Subjects in the CCP rated their own and partner's communication in the posttest and follow-up discussions as more positive than CSW subjects. CCP couples also felt more overall satisfaction with their discussions. Comparisons with communication prior to training revealed mixed results. CCP couples perceived their posttest discussion as comparatively better than CSW couples, while opposite ratings held for the follow-up. Finally, all couples tended to believe their discussions would have been similar had they taken place at home.

DISCUSSION

Although the results of this study are not unequivocal, they do suggest that the Couples Communication Program may be a viable alternative to behaviorally-oriented communication training. When attempting to resolve relationship conflicts, CCP couples tended to exchange more positive and less negative nonverbal behaviors than CSW couples. Since nonverbal behaviors would seem less susceptible to "faking" than verbal behaviors, this finding deserves serious attention. Both the CSW and CCP training programs were successful in decreasing verbal negative messages relative to the nontrained control group.

Interestingly, except for the posttest MCI score of the CSW group, the self-report measures failed to significantly differentiate between conditions. Whether these results reflect a conventionality bias, lack of improvement in global feelings of relationship satisfaction or some other reason(s) awaits further investigation.

The differences between group leaders in the CSW and CCP groups must be considered when interpreting these results. CCP leaders were older, better trained and had substantially more group leading experience. Although an attempt was made to monitor group leaders' adherence to their respective training manuals, other nonspecific factors associated with leadership experience may have been influential.

The results of this study also indicates the need for further understanding of the specific differences between training programs. Ironically, it seems possible that "poor communication" between bahavioral and non-behavioral investigators may have led to a perception of differences that is more apparent (or semantic) than real. For example, CCP procedures to increase awareness might be found in a behavioral training program under the label of "cognitive restruc-

turing". Assuming even the partial validity of this notion, the differences between the CSW and CCP outcomes may be less substantive and more related to variables associated with group leadership and presentation of learning material ("marketing style").

Finally, it should be noted that the results reported in this paper are somewhat preliminary and therefore await further analysis.

REFERENCES

Bienvenu, M.J. Measurement of marital communication. The Family Coordinator, 1970, 19, 26-31.

Birchler, G.R., & Webb, L. Discriminant self-reported measures of happy and unhappy marriages: A social learning formulation. Unpublished manuscript, 1975.

Birchler, G.R., Weiss, R.L., & Vincent, J.P. Multi-method analysis of social reinforcement exchange between maritally distressed and non-distressed spouse and stranger dyads. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1975, 31, 349-360.

Larsen, G.R. An evaluation of the Minnesota couples communication training program's influence on marital communication and self and mate perception. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 1974.

Liberman, R.P., Wheeler, E., & Sanders, N. Behavioral therapy for marital disharmony: An educational approach. Journal of Marriage and Family Counseling, 1976, 2, 383-395.

Mehrabian, A., & Reed, H. Some determinants of communication accuracy. Psychological Bulletin, 1968, 70, 365-381.

Miller, S., Nunnally, E., & Wackman, D. A communication training program for couples. Social Casework, 1976, 9-18.

Miller, S., Nunnally, E., & Wackman, D. Alive and aware: Improving communication in relationships. Minneapolis: Interpersonal Communications Programs, Inc., 1975.

Nunnally, E., Miller, S., & Wackman, D. The Minnesota couples communication program. Small Group Behavior, 1975, 6, 57-69.

Pace, R.W., & Boren, R.R. The Human Transaction. Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman and Co., 1973.

Patterson, G.R., & Hops, H. Coercion, a game for two: Intervention techniques for marital conflict. In R.E. Ulrich & P. Mountjoy (Eds.), The experimental analysis of social behavior. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1972.

Patterson, G.R., Hops, H., & Weiss, R.L. Interpersonal skills training for couples in early stages of conflict. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1975, 37, 295-303.

Staats, A.Q. Language behavior therapy: A derivative of social behaviorism. Behavior Therapy, 1972, 3, 165-192.

Stuart, R.B. Operant-interpersonal treatment for marital discord. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1969, 33, 675-682.

Stuart, R.B. Behavioral remedies for marital ills: A guide to the use of operant-interpersonal techniques. In A.S. Gurman & D.G. Rice (Eds.) Couples in conflict: New directions in marital therapy. New York: Aronson, 1974.

Weiss, R.L., & Margolin, G. Assessment in marital conflict and accord. In Ciminero, A.R., & Adams, H.E. (Eds.) Handbook for behavioral assessment. New York: Wiley, 1976.

Witkin, S.L., & Rose, S.D. Group training in communication skills for couples: A preliminary report. International Journal of Family Counseling, 1978, In press.

FOOTNOTES

The research reported in this article was supported by research grant 1 R01 MH 28025-01 from the National Institute of Mental Health; Sheldon D. Rose, Principal Investigator.

[1]All couples met the above acceptance criteria. The sample was reduced to fifty-four couples (n=18) due to the failure of two control couples to attend the pretraining assessment, the early droupout from the study of two couples, and the "setting aside" of two randomly selected couples from the CCP condition to facilitate data interpretation.

[2]Only results of the conflict resolution discussion are reported here.

[3]The CCP leader certification process consists of participation in a CCP group, assigned readings, participation with co-leader in a three-day workshop, and leading three "intern" groups with participant feedback.

[4]Differences between pretraining scores on the MAQ (see Table 3) suggests that randomization was not successful in equating subjects across conditions. Although use of these prescores as covariates may partially offset this disparity, the possibility of differences on other variables cannot be ruled out.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Subjects by Condition

Variable	CSW	CCP	Control
Male age	33.79(10.32)	33.90(8.03)	32.33(11.9?)
Female age	30.79(9.98)	32.00(7.49)	27.56(10.17)
Male education[a]	16.47(2.01)	18.05(2.50)	17.50(3.20)
Female education	15.52(1.84)	16.25(2.15)	15.67(1.41)
Length of marriage (years)	8.22(9.48)	7.34(7.32)	7.56(11.74)
Number of children	1.05(1.35)	1.45(1.54)	.72(1.01)

Note. Numbers in parenthesis equal standard deviation.

[a]Difference between CSW and CCP significant at $p < .06$

Table 2

Comparison of Demographic Variables

and Previous Experience of CCP and CSW Group Leaders

	t	CCP[a]	CSW[b]
Age	2.83*	45.00	27.40
Education (years)	.52	18.00	17.40
Previous Groups Led	9.11**	39.75	12.40
Previous Communication Groups Led	3.89*	8.50	1.20

[a] n = 5 (three leaders trained two groups)

[b] n = 8

*p < .01

**p < .001

Table 3

Univariate F Ratios and Adjusted Means for Self-report Measures

Index	F[a]	CSW	CCP	Control
		Posttest		
A-C	.19	11.52	12.84	11.81
MAQ[b]	.84	109.30	111.10	108.30
MCI	3.38*	98.70	96.07	90.42
		Follow-up		
A-C	.91	8.64	11.78	11.63
MAQ	.12	108.78	109.68	107.99
MCI	1.49	98.16	95.91	91.33

Note. MAQ pretraining scores used as covariate

[b] pretraining means (unadjusted) were CSW: 101.02; CCP: 107.43; CONTROL: 110.00.

*$p < .05$

Table 4

Univariate F Ratios and Adjusted Means

for MICS Summary Categories at Posttest

Variable	F[a]	CSW	CCP	Control
Verbal Positive	1.99	.36	.37	.30
Nonverbal Positive	6.95***	1.14	1.35	1.02
Verbal Negative	4.58**	.83	.65	.94
Nonverbal Negative	3.20*	.37	.25	.49
Problem Solving	1.61	.78	.74	.66

Note. Arcsine tranformations customary for proportional data used in computation of F-ratios

[a]degrees of freedom = 2,50

*$p < .05$

**$p < .025$

***$p < .01$

Table 5

Univariate F Ratios and Adjusted Means

for MICS Summary Categories at Follow-up

Variable	F[a]	CSW	CCP	Control
Verbal Positive	.30	.35	.38	.39
Nonverbal Positive	11.13**	.98	1.29	.98
Verbal Negative	5.91*	.78	.67	.93
Nonverbal Negative	2.98	.55	.29	.46
Problem Solving	.72	.75	.73	.69

Note. Arcsine tranformations customary for proportional data use in computation of F-ratios

[a]degrees of freedom = 2,50

*$p < .01$

**$p < .001$

Table 6

Pairwise Comparisons of Post and Follow-up MICS Summary Categories

	p[a]		
Variable	CSW vs CCP	CSW vs Control	CCP vs Control
	Posttest		
Nonverbal Positive	5.34*	1.70	13.51***
Verbal Negative	3.32	1.25	8.95***
Nonverbal Negative	1.43	1.65	6.39**
	Follow-up		
Nonverbal Positive	13.13***	.50	19.23***
Verbal Negative	.43	6.47**	10.75***
Nonverbal Negative	5.45*	.36	3.05

Note. Comparisons computed only for previously significant F-ratios

[a]degrees of freedom - 1,50

*$p < .025$

**$p < .01$

***$p < .001$